



An Exploration of Teacher Power and its Place in Negotiation as a Teaching Strategy in Early Years

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ABSTRACT

A small scale case study research investigation evolved from an exploration of the beliefs held by early childhood teachers in relation to the balance of power in the teaching strategies they used. A strategy of negotiation supported the development of a model where instruction, co-construction and negotiation are connected to the problem solving states of dependence, interdependence and independence.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the 'balance of power' teachers control within some teaching strategies used in problem solving within early childhood education (ECE) programmes. A model has been developed which connects three teaching strategies to a child's three states of thinking; dependent, interdependent and independent. These are aligned with instruction, co-construction and negotiation (Bernstone, 2007). The focus is on the understanding of negotiation as one of these teaching strategies positioned alongside the state of independence. It explains a process that requires particular skills for successful negotiation to occur and which could provide the abilities children may need to deal with the uncertainty and complexity (Codd, 2008) of our current world.

My ontological position is that of interpretivist. This explains how I view the world. My epistemological position is that of social constructivism which explains how I think I have come to learn about the world. Both of these positions are embedded in my theoretical underpinning of socio-cultural theory. In this paper teaching strategies lying amidst socio-cultural theory are discussed as I deepen my interest in the increasing dichotomy there seems to be between what we are proselytising in ECE centres and what is happening to people outside the early childhood setting. Therefore, I pose the question, what is the reality and could children's ability to negotiate support management of different realities?

BACKGROUND

An exploration of teaching strategies evolved as a focus for my doctoral research that had begun by investigating the relationship between the beliefs of early childhood teachers and their practice. During my reviewing of the relevant literature I came upon Daniels' (2001) comment where he posits the question whether scaffolds were produced by the expert or negotiated. This idea that the scaffold was a negotiated process alerted me to the level of contribution of the child or less expert in this scaffold relationship. By searching for the definitions of both 'instruction' and 'negotiation' within early childhood discourse I found that the word

instruction consistently held similar definitions. For example, MacNaughton and Williams (2004) suggest that instruction is a specific form of telling.

However, negotiation surfaced as having a variety of explanations with few definitions of it as a teaching strategy. Negotiation was ubiquitous in the literature with regard to early childhood education but it was only ever defined in relation to the topic being discussed. It was not used as a generic term. For example, Ramsey (1987) uses the word when engaging with children to 'negotiate their sense of self' (p. 117); MacNaughton and Williams (2004, p. 215) use the term in 'negotiating meaning', and Nuttall (2004, p. 39) views it in terms of 'negotiating reality in early childhood curriculum'. There were few definitions found relating to negotiation as a teaching strategy in early childhood education. The paper by Rubin and Everett (1982) described negotiation as involving the ability to work out a deal where each participant's needs were considered.

As a consequence my mind turned to that of 'industrial negotiation', a process I had been party to in another life where conditions of employment had been the focus and where the balance of power was of constant concern. The literature therefore became focussed on industrial definitions of negotiation with the work of Forsyth (1991) and Fisher and Ury (1982) being scrutinised. I considered the understandings of negotiation put forward by these writers and took my interpretation of these back to the context of early childhood education; specifically to the teacher-child scaffold relationship and the balance of power inherent in this process.

So how was this word 'negotiation' being understood by teachers who used the word in discussion about teaching strategies? Was it about the balance of power that teachers were referring to when they said they 'negotiated with children'?

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews undertaken within this small scale qualitative case study process identified that 3 of the 8 teachers were interpreting a more equal balance of power within the word 'negotiation' than others. But, most were explaining it as it would sit within the interpretation of the co-construction strategy as researched by Jordan (2004). Jordan identified that where co-construction occurred there was greater empowerment than when a scaffolding process was used. The focus in co-construction was on 'developing shared meanings/ intersubjectivity and each participant contributing to their on going learning experiences from their own expertise and points of view' (p. 42). From the original 167 observations I carried out within my own research the analysis made clear that there were two distinct types of instruction that I categorised into direct instruction (telling) and indirect instruction (often put as a rhetorical question). It was 'indirect instruction' that was the most common practice of the majority of these teachers despite their belief that they negotiated with children. An example was when the teacher said after the child had thrown the paper rubbish on the floor, 'Where do we put the rubbish?' This instruction I perceived as distinct from direct instruction which would be, 'Put the rubbish in the bin.' From this indirect instruction – or guidance which contained a pre-determined expectation – I decided that the balance of power was heavily weighted towards the notion of empowerment where the teacher *thought* she was giving the child the opportunity to have a choice. My thoughts were confirmed through the interviews with the teachers I had been observing that it was this understanding that led some teachers to believe they were negotiating.

By bringing together the analysis of the observations and the literature relevant to the process of negotiation, it became clear that negotiation had to be a sequenced conversation where open questioning and a higher level of questioning was used. This was unlike the overt imbalance of power within a scaffold process where my research found that there was a correlation between closed low-level questions and linear thinking. By comparison, the words used in what I had defined as words of negotiation were at least bi-directional or multi-directional allowing transformational thinking to ensue rather than a straight forward transfer of knowledge. For example, Walsh and Sattes (2005) identify the following as some characteristics of quality questions that I believe could result in transformational thinking:

... words and phrases that cue students to respond at the intended cognitive level, prompts students to see relationships and patterns, demonstrate understandings and make connections, engages student thinking, asks students to process knowledge and prompts students to see connections. (p. 24)

The multi-layered concept of negotiation, Forsyth (1991) believed, was concerned with the 'relationship between two parties where the needs of both were largely in balance' (p. xiii). This balance was understood as defining the need. It was this idea of the importance of balance, to my thinking a balance of power, that caused me to question whether negotiation was possible for the four to five year old child. The construct of an *equal balance of power* began my thinking that negotiation could be a teaching strategy that sat outside the scaffold process. It filled a gap in my understanding of the differing positions there were on learning. The question could now be asked whether a child and a teacher could hold an equal amount of knowledge and skill in a particular situation to enable an equal balance of power to operate within a problem solving situation.

From analyses of many observations, and concurring with many of Forsyth's (1991) suggestions for successful negotiating, I developed the following list of abilities to enable the possibility of an equal balance of power:

- able to verbally express the goal
- good use of language
- able to access the material resources without assistance
- knowledge of what material resources would be required
- plans how to reach the goal
- accepts or rejects assistance and justifies why
- knows when to invite help
- suggests ideas and justifies them
- compromises if needed
- hears and understands the justification for a different perspective
- summarises where she has reached in the plan
- able to agree

My reading about *negotiation* and my analysis of the observations would not support the concept of having an ability to negotiate within the frame of the scaffold. It is implicit that the power lies with the expert in the beginning of the scaffold process with a transfer of that power to the less expert as the problem solving evolves. Negotiation implies an equal sharing of power from the beginning of the problem solving event with both participants holding the same amount of power when the negotiation begins and ends. This can *only* happen if there is recognition that both have a valued cultural history and, from this, equally valid ideas to contribute. This understanding, along with the abilities I identified above, provided the platform for a teaching strategy of negotiation.

A model (Bernstone, 2007) evolved as my thinking followed through to the possibility of two people – teacher and child or child and child – having an equal share of power within a problem solving situation. I believed that this was only possible if:

- the teacher values the child's interpretation of her past experiences embedded in her culture and therefore allows her to bring these interpretations to a current problem solving situation;
- the teacher has a goal that children should have the opportunity to become independent thinkers/ problem solvers and share at least half the power with the adult or other child.

From four observations of children, I identified that where two four and a half year old children were playing each child demonstrated the ability to accept each other as unconditional equal partners. There was a natural valuing of each other's cultural background and therefore the contribution each made to the solving of the problem. The balance of power in their problem solving situation I perceived as equal. Here is their example:¹

C.1 *Who is going to help me with the train track?* [Invite help and express goal]

C.2 *I will. Where is it going to go?*

C.1 *I want it to go there.*

C.2 *Here's better.*

C.1 *But if we put it there it will hit the table.* [Suggest idea and justify]

C.2 *Could go under the table?* [Plan how to reach a goal]

C.1 *No. That's no good, would hit the wall.* [Reject idea and justify]

C.2 *We could make it go up a hill?* [Compromise]

C.1 *Could use books to go under the rails to get a hill?*
[Understand justification for different perspective]

C.2 *Blocks eh!* (Knowledge of resources required)

C.1 *Yeah. I'll get the blocks.* [Access resources]

C.2 *I'll join the rail tracks. This will be a good track for the trains.*
[Good supportive use of language]

¹ Skills I have identified as essential for equal power sharing during negotiation are added in parentheses.

As my understanding developed that there could be an equal sharing of power from the beginning of a problem being solved to its conclusion, I began to think about the relationship amongst the three key teaching strategies of instruction, co-construction and negotiation. The first two strategies were different levels of empowerment. Negotiation held the equal balance of power as both participants already had a similar level of power in a particular situation. This interpretation is supported by Jordan's (2004) research and explanation around 'co-construction' and MacNaughton and Williams (2004) comments regarding 'instruction'. The model developed from this thinking could target different children with different levels of competence in different areas of their play.

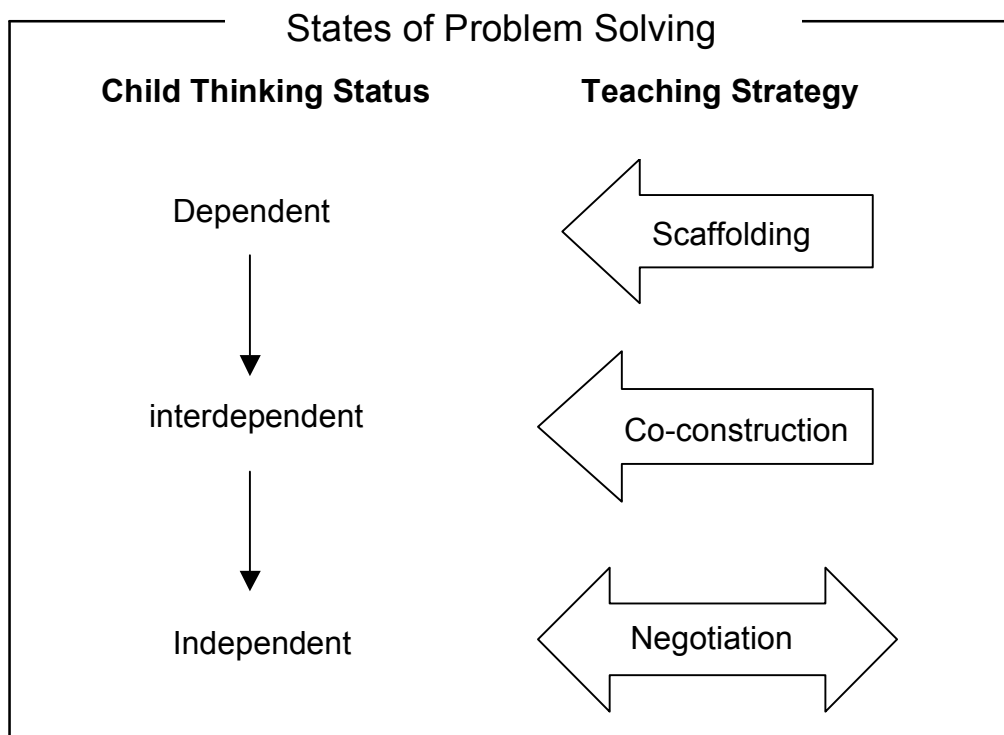


Figure 1: States of Problem Solving Based on the Balance of Power Between the Teacher and Child

Although this model appears as a staged process with teaching strategies aligned to the child's thinking or self-belief status, there would be different entry points depending on what it was the child wanted to resolve. For example, if the child were just beginning to attend the centre she would be dependent on the teacher showing her where to hang her coat or how to use the glue stick. Therefore the teacher would instruct or guide the child and use the scaffold process. This same child could have spent lots of time in the sandpit with siblings or at the beach prior to coming to the early childhood education setting. In this case, her play could be observed as interdependent because she was more confident and demonstrated some independent problem solving. This thinking state or state of self-belief requires that both the teacher and the child need each other to move their thinking forward. A co-constructive teaching strategy could be applied in this situation. However if this child had the experiences and had been supported through the application of instruction and co-construction teaching strategies (and also demonstrated the abilities I have identified above which are essential for successful negotiation) the teacher and child could use the problem solving strategy of

negotiation. Although all teaching strategies within this model could work to have the same outcome of 'independent thinkers', the processes of how these states of independent thinking are reached are the points of difference.

CONCLUSION

The words in the model discussed above still raise many questions such as those related to how they have been defined. However, there is no doubt in my mind that teaching strategies are about the different degrees of control of power. For me as a teacher, knowledge is power and I understand that both the child and I have knowledge. It may be different knowledge but despite this we both hold power. How do we as teachers acknowledge this power in each of us? Is power and knowledge the same thing? Whose knowledge are we permitted to access? These are important questions we need to ask ourselves in relation to our beliefs and practices.

As teachers, I believe we could consider having a process for building in the skills required for children to move from being dependent thinkers to being independent thinkers, as this latter state gives children the ultimate in choice. 'Do I want to join the group or do I want to play alone because I have the confidence, competence and understanding to do both?' Power is to do with perception and action. We react to the person we see as powerful in particular ways depending on our interpretation of our past experiences. We need to be aware that power can skew knowledge. For me, this supports the understanding that we need to learn to see others' perceptions as valid and a truth to them. As teachers we perhaps need to ask, who owns the power and who owns the knowledge; and, knowing this, what difference does it make to our learning and teaching in relation to our philosophy?

This small scale research project began by considering the relationship between teacher beliefs and their application of these beliefs in practice. It evolved to a focus on the power balance within teaching strategies. This has been explored through my socio-cultural theoretical beliefs and my interpretivist and social constructivist positions about learning. The development of a model which defines some critical points of the thinking states of children, connected to specific teaching strategies, could speed up the child's shift to greater independence in her thinking and self-efficacy. If the teacher has observed well and values the child's unique interpretation of her experiences, this would contribute to her unique way of seeing and solving the problem. Perhaps the confidence and competence required to negotiate based on the perspective of an equal balance of power could help children live more successfully in the many worlds to which they must adapt. Two of these worlds are the values of the Early Childhood Centre culture and those of the other world they share with their whaanau and community. These may be very different.

As teachers we need to acknowledge the power we hold but we also need to ask: to whose reality are we responding? And, what is our responsibility to share this power in terms of the knowledge we allow our children to access as independent thinkers?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am a senior lecturer at Manukau Institute of Technology in South Auckland. In 2007 I graduated with my Ed.D from Brunel University in London although the research data was gathered in Auckland. I am passionate about the quality of learning early childhood education provides in New Zealand and its embeddedness within neoliberal political theory. Because of this I am developing a growing concern with the concept of 'reality'. How do Early Childhood Education teachers bridge this disjuncture between the values and beliefs promoted within centres and those of society outside the centre gates. Whose reality are

we advocating? Teaching strategies, I believe, can inform us of where the power is held and how this power is used to promote learning within the reality as the power holder perceives it.

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